

A Protestant Looks at Lourdes



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By

Ruth Cranston

COVER ART: Photograph of the Basilique Notre-Dame du Rosaire à Lourdes. The photo is in the Public Domain. *



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Introduction

The cures at Lourdes—cures of the hopelessly sick and disabled by forces unknown to modern science—have made that small French town the most visited shrine in the world. For nearly 100 years, they have also been a source of endless controversy and wonder among doctors and lay people alike.

“The Miracle of Lourdes” is an exhaustive first-hand study of the famous Catholic shrine and its cures. To prepare for it, Ruth Cranston, author of this booklet, lived in Lourdes, talked with doctors, nurses, stretcher-bearers, patients. A protestant herself, her approach was that of a reporter and impartial investigator. She verified and documented the facts she presents. No reader will finish Ruth’s report without feeling that, whatever the explanation, the experience of Lourdes reveals something profoundly significant to men and women everywhere.

A Visit to Lourdes

I went to Lourdes out of an irrepressible curiosity.

For years, I had been interested in the part that faith can play in alleviating our human ills. Yet I had known very little about this famous French shrine until one morning my eye fell on the headline:

*“MENTALLY DISABLED CHILD CURED AT LOURDES—
BOY OF SEVEN REGAINS FULL INTELLIGENCE
AFTER YEARS OF LIVING LIKE AN ANIMAL.”*

This incredible newspaper story, which also told of other startling cures including cancer of the stomach, peritonitis, lung tumors, and angina—stirred my imagination. I wanted to know more about Lourdes.

I read every book I could find on the subject, in both English and French, for I spent much of my youth in France and knew the language. The more I read about it, the more deeply I became interested. Was this Catholic shrine, which apparently produced such staggering physical cures and drew over two million pilgrims each year, simply a mass delusion?

Was it a gigantic hoax or was it truly, as my French authors presented it, a place of simple sincerity, reverence, and amazing miracles?

I decided to see for myself. I had no axe to grind. I was not a Catholic but a protestant. I belonged to no organization, religious, medical, or metaphysical, that had any interest in my findings. I am just an ordinary citizen with an inquiring mind, bent on my own quest.

When I reached Lourdes in the spring of 1953, the help of Monsignor Theas, Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, and Doctor Francois Leuret, President of the Medical Bureau, opened every door. Nurses, protestant physicians, the sick, and those who had been cured cooperated wholeheartedly to make this report possible.

Lourdes, a thriving town of some 13,000 residents, lies near the Spanish border. If you are lucky, you come into it—as I did—in the radiant early morning: the sun just rolling up into a dazzling sky, silver streams rushing along between rows of swaying willows; the mountains soft and hazy in the distance.

For an hour, the train has been speeding through rich waving cornfields, dotted with red-roofed farmhouses and clumps of dark-green cypress trees. As we enter Lourdes, we see that a long pilgrimage train is also just arriving. From every window, eager faces of the sick look out full of hope. Although many of them have endured bitter suffering during their journey, they seem amazingly cheerful. Someone starts a hymn, the “Song of Bernadette.” I learned later, this is the theme song here. One hears it everywhere. Now car after car takes it up, until the entire pilgrimage train is ringing with it:

“AVE, AVE, AVE, MARIA. AVE, AVE, AVE, MARIA!”

On this wave of joyous praise and hope, we move into the Lourdes station. There, groups of leather-harnessed stretcher-bearers and blue-caped nurses hurry along the platform to assist with the very sick. The more healthy pilgrims line up with the pilgrimage director or rush about to see their invalids safely established in the hospital ambulances.

Lourdes is not like any place you have ever seen. You are in a city of pilgrims, and they are everywhere; people who have come from the four corners of the earth with but one purpose: prayer and healing, for themselves or for their loved ones. The city exists for them. You will be surrounded by them every moment of your stay in Lourdes.

The main street (ancient Rue De la Grotte) is a typical mountain town thoroughfare—narrow, bustling, noisy; shops offering varied Lourdes souvenirs crowd the tiny sidewalks. Pilgrims tramp up and down here all day long with their knapsacks and lunchboxes.

Follow this street to the bottom of the hill (Lourdes is a town of steep hills and sudden dramatic vistas) and it takes you into Avenue Bernadette. Equally crowded, equally noisy, this leads directly to the Domaine, the vast enclosed park that contains the baths, sanctuaries, hospital, and all buildings supporting the complex administration of the shrine.

This is the section of Lourdes for which the rest of Lourdes exists. All day and every day, a continuous throng is surging toward it. Here are people of many tongues and many garbs: a Scottish stretcher-bearer in a kilt; a Swiss pastor, shepherding his

picturesque Swiss flock in their wide lace headdresses; English curates, Italian monsignors, American and Irish bishops in colorful purple; French peasants, American students, Dutch sailors, and beves of little boys and girls in provincial costume.

The old and the new jostle each other at every turn: donkeys carrying huge bundles of laundry to the convent on the hill; young men tearing through on motor bikes; groups of humble village priests trudging along barefoot; an actress in a long convertible en route to Biarritz. At the corner, cars and buses rush by—until suddenly a girl appears with a big herd of sheep. All halt, resignedly, and wait for her to go through. After all, Lourdes is still very much a country town.

Cross the perilous, strident highway, enter the big iron gate, and you are in the Domaine—the refuge where the endless stream of pilgrims turn their backs upon the world outside and give themselves to prayer. The minute you enter this consecrated area, you yourself feel more peaceful. It is a place of wide green lawns dotted with sacred statuary, of magnificent trees and spacious vistas. All about are rolling hills and the beauty of the grey-green countryside. Walk to the right, under the arcades of the great horseshoe shaped ramp that sweeps out from the shrine's three churches and you find the famous piscines, or baths, where the pilgrims come to be plunged into the waters of the spring. Pass the fountains where thousands come to drink and to carry away Lourdes water, and soon you come to the very heart of Lourdes, the Grotto.

Here, in a cleft in the mountain wall, flanked by tall pyramids of creamy flowers and hundreds of flickering candles, stands a statue of the Virgin. The sides of the Grotto are worn smooth by all the hands and lips that have reverently touched it.

All day long people are praying here, absorbed, withdrawn. Procession after procession comes and goes. Pilgrims are from Brussels, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Luxembourg, Dublin; they are from everywhere. For, today, this is the most visited shrine in the world.

All because, the people of Lourdes will tell you, a young girl had a vision, and was faithful to it to the end.

Bernadette and The Lady

The story goes that, nearly a hundred years ago—it was February 11, 1858—the Virgin Mary appeared to a 14-year old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, while she was out gathering firewood. Bernadette saw “The Lady” in a sort of radiant mist in the grotto. A series of such visions followed, during which The Lady instructed Bernadette, “Tell the priests to build a chapel on this spot. I want people to come here in procession. . . . Pray—tell them to pray! Go and drink from the spring and wash in it.”

No spring had been known to exist there, but when the child dug in the earth at the indicated spot, it appeared. At first a mere trickle, it soon became a powerful stream.

From the beginning, the people believed in Bernadette. She communicated her intense faith and vision to them and they followed her implicitly, built a rude shrine at the spring, and prayed there in increasing numbers. Yet, local authorities scorned the visions, threatened Bernadette and her family, and attempted to close the shrine.

Then the miracles began. A blind man who washed his eyes in the spring water found that his sight was restored. A mother, one of Bernadette's neighbors, dipped her dying child in the waters and the little boy not only lived but also became well and robust for the first time in his life. The child had suffered from a bone disease that completely paralyzed his legs and had been beset by violent convulsions until the physician finally pronounced his death in "only a matter of hours." Since the cure restored the child to complete health within 24 hours, the case made a profound impression, even on the medical profession. Soon people began to bring their sick from all over the land.

Finally, the Church set up a commission to investigate the whole matter. After four years' of study it completely vindicated Bernadette and declared that certain cures had occurred that must be considered contrary to all known biological laws. Eventually, in 1933, 54 years after her death, Bernadette was canonized at Saint Peter's in Rome. One of the honored guests at that ceremony was a 77-year old man, Louis-Justin Bouhohorts, who owed his life to Bernadette. You see, he had been that dying child, paralyzed and convulsive, who had been saved by one of Lourdes' first widely publicized miracles.

Although the Church quite early accepted the miracles of Lourdes as authentic, the medical profession did not. For many years doctors pronounced Bernadette "hallucinated," and the dramatically cured patients victims of "false diagnoses," "hysteria," and "auto-suggestion." The medical profession considered Lourdes a resort for dupes and fakers.

Medical Doubts Fade

In 1903, a young doctor at the University of Lyons was ridiculed because he mentioned that a tuberculosis case he attended had been miraculously cured at Lourdes. "With such views, sir," said the Dean coldly, "you can hardly expect to be received as a member of our faculty!"

"In that case," said the young physician, "I must look elsewhere." He went to New York, to the Rockefeller Institute and, in 1912, as a result of his research there, received the Nobel Prize. His name was Alex Carrel.

However, the implacable professional prejudice against Lourdes had been breaking down for many years prior to that time. The Bureau of Medical Verification, established at Lourdes in 1885 for professional study of alleged cures, attracted to the shrine an increasing number of curious doctors of all beliefs. In 1893, the celebrated French neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot, wrote sympathetically of Lourdes cures under the title, “The Faith Which Heals.” In 1906, when a Paris editor launched a bitter press campaign to close Lourdes in the name of hygiene, he met with an unexpected and thunderous reply. A physician in Lyons (the city from which Doctor Alexis Carrel had departed only a few years before) gathered the signatures of 3,000 doctors testifying to the invaluable services rendered by Lourdes to the sick “whom we doctors have been powerless to save,” and insisting that nothing be done to interfere with them.

A large number of books have since appeared by medical men of high reputation, discussing the phenomena of Lourdes and giving accounts of outstanding cures. Yet, the most powerful force in transforming public and professional medical opinion has been the cures themselves. They have constituted a living argument that is difficult to explain away. Their cases are documented in the archives of the Medical Bureau. Here are some of them.

Gabriel Gargam

In December of 1900, Gabriel Gargam, a railway postal clerk, was at his work sorting mail on the Orleans Southwest Express when the train was wrecked. He woke up in a hospital bandaged from head to foot. He had been crushed almost to death. His collarbone was broken and his spine was hopelessly injured, paralyzing him from the waist down. The least movement produced vomiting, and he had to be fed painfully through a tube. A court ordered the railroad to pay 6,000 francs annually, since he was “a human wreck who would henceforth need at least two persons to care for him.”

After 20 months in the hospital, Gabriel was growing weaker every day. He could no longer swallow. The doctors warned his family that death was near.

Gargam had not set foot in a church for over 15 years. His mother, a deeply religious woman, persuaded him to undertake the pilgrimage to Lourdes. The journey was accomplished with great suffering, on a stretcher.

On his first afternoon at Lourdes, Gabriel lay on the route of the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament. He was extremely weak and soon was unconscious—his features relaxed, cold, and blue. At the moment his nurse thought him dying, he suddenly opened his eyes, raised himself on his elbow, fell back again, tried a second time, and succeeded to get up. His paralysis was gone. He had recovered entire freedom of movement.

He was taken to the Medical Bureau, where doctors and newspaper correspondents surrounded him. “Gargam arrived wrapped in a long bathrobe,” one records. “He stood before us, a specter. Big staring eyes alone were living in his emaciated colorless face.” He was now able to throw aside his tube and eat normally. In a few days, he gained 20 pounds. When he returned home, the post-office department’s physician told him he could immediately resume his post.

His case created a sensation. The 60 physicians who examined him at Lourdes all agreed that this cure was scientifically inexplicable. Indeed, Gabriel had great difficulty in persuading the incredulous railroad officers to discontinue his annuity. He enjoyed robust health for the rest of his life. He came to Lourdes each year, serving tirelessly as a stretcher-bearer, until his death in 1952 at the age of 83.

Madame Marie Bire

Madame Marie Bire of Lucon, hardworking mother of six children, suffered fiendish headaches, and dizziness. Finally, she was stricken with blindness. After examining her, the doctor said, “I hate to tell you, Madame, but there has been a complete wasting of the optic nerves. I’m afraid there’s no cure.”

Some months later Madame Bire went to Lourdes, accompanied by her doctor and her oldest daughter. At the Grotto, which she visited in an invalid carriage, she suddenly stood up and said, “Ah, I see the Blessed Virgin!” She fell back into the carriage seat, fainting. Her daughter thought she was dying. Yet, Madame Bire quickly recovered consciousness and found that she could still see.

She was taken to the Medical Bureau and examined by several doctors—among them Doctor Henri Lainey, an oculist from Rouen, who wrote, “Examination of the eyes with the ophthalmoscope showed on both sides a white pearly papilla, devoid of all color. The diagnosis was forced upon me: here was white atrophy of the optic nerve, of cerebral cause. This, one of the gravest affections, is recognized by all authorities as incurable. Yet, Madame Bire could read the finest print and her distant vision was just as good.” She had recovered her sight, but the lesions remained. They were to disappear a short time later.

Ten doctors made a second examination the next day with the same results: the optic nerve was still atrophied and lifeless, but the sight still clear and perfect. Questions followed thick and fast. One doctor asked impatiently, “How can you see, Madame, when you have no papillae?”

“Listen, gentlemen, I am not familiar with your learned words,” Madame Bire replied with spirit. “I have just one thing to say. For nearly six months, I could not see, and now I can see. That is enough for me!”

It had to be enough for her questioners also. They acknowledged that the cure appeared complete. The future would tell whether it was permanent.

A month after she returned home, three eye specialists examined Madame Bire again. The Medical Bureau wished to know whether she was still seeing with “dead” eyes. They found that the phenomena had ceased. One of the examining physicians wrote, “All traces of papillary atrophy have disappeared. There are no longer lesions. The cure is complete.”

That was in the fall of 1908. When the president of the Medical Bureau, Doctor Auguste Vallet, saw her 20 years later, her sight was still excellent. All the doctors who studied the case found her cure “absolutely inexplicable clinically.”

Madame Augustine Augault

“What is the most remarkable cure you’ve witnessed?” I asked one of the doctors at the Bureau, an old-timer who had been coming to Lourdes every year for 20 years.

“It’s hard to select,” he said. “But—well, there was Madame Augustine Augault—a remarkable case. I lived near her, knew the two surgeons who attended her, and knew her parish priest. I know that her cure was genuine.”

Augustine Augault had been ill for 12 years with a fibroid tumor of the uterus. It had grown to such enormous proportions that the pressure had caused chronic gastric troubles and vomiting. A heart condition made an operation impossible and the case had reached an apparently hopeless stage.

As a last resort, Madame Augault decided to go to Lourdes. Her family physician strongly opposed the journey, telling her that she would never come back alive. However Madame Augault persisted.

She made the journey on a mattress, at the end of her strength and very close to death. Four injections were necessary to help her heart during the trip. A doctor who visited her on the train told the Medical Bureau later that he “had been startled by the dimensions of her abdomen.”

On her first morning at Lourdes, she was taken to the baths on a stretcher. During the brief instant of her immersion she felt excruciating pain, then the pressure in her abdomen seemed to disappear. Yet, she was very tired and continued to suffer terribly

until she was carried on her stretcher to the Procession at four that afternoon. Then, at the precise moment when the Blessed Sacrament passed by, her sufferings vanished, and she was conscious of a rebirth of her energies.

She stayed on her cot, however, and said nothing about how she felt. The next day she was again taken to the piscine. The attendants who had bathed her before observed with amazement that her abdomen was entirely flat and apparently normal. Moreover, she was able to walk.

After this bath, she was taken to the Medical Bureau and examined by some 30 doctors. The official record states, "On examination, the abdomen was found to be perfectly supple. The skin was 'pleated' like that of a woman who has had a child. The belt worn by the invalid upon her arrival at Lourdes is now seven inches too large. The coat, on which the buttonholes show marks of stretching from the distension of the abdomen, has become much too big and now overlaps considerably."

Madame Augault's cure was permanent.

Other Extraordinary Cures

Other extraordinary cures baffled the doctors during those early years of the shrine. Little Yvonne Aumaitre, daughter of a Nantes physician, was cured, at the age of two, of double clubfoot—the case being recorded by her father in the Medical Bureau records. Constance Piquet was cured of cancer of the breast—an advanced case pronounced inoperable by two Parisian doctors. Marie Le Marchand, her face half eaten away by a tuberculous skin disease, came out of the piscine with only a long red scar to remind her of her former malady. A vivid account of her before-and-after appearance is on file in the Medical Bureau.

Such cases gave pause to even the most antagonistic doctors, and the attitude of the medical profession as a whole changed considerably. As a British doctor wrote in 1930, "The change is from skepticism and incredulity to an acknowledgement, not necessarily of the supernatural, that cures do occur at Lourdes that cannot be explained by any known biological laws."

A year later, the Society of Medicine and Surgery of Bordeaux devoted an entire meeting to Lourdes. The papers read by the various doctors, discussing cases of sudden inexplicable healing, were later printed in Bordeaux's solidly respectable Fortnightly Gazette of Medical Science.

It was obvious that medical men no longer dismissed the shrine as merely a resort for charlatans and crackpots.

This interest of the medical profession has continued. In 1953, some 1,500 doctors from all over the world registered at the Lourdes Medical Bureau. Many of them, as is true every year, studied the records and helped examine the patients. The International Medical Association of Lourdes, organized in 1927, has an enrollment of 5,000 doctors, from 30 countries, who assist in the methodical checking of alleged cures.

This does not mean there is no longer opposition or hostility. There is plenty. “But,” as Doctor A. Marchand wrote in his *The Facts of Lourdes*, “the time of systematic contempt has passed.”

Verification of Cures

How are the cures verified? What safeguards are there against fraud? To begin with, every pilgrimage is accompanied by one or more medical personnel and no sick person is accepted without a medical certificate from his home physician stating his or her disease and present condition. When a supposed cure occurs, the pilgrimage doctor reports at once to the Medical Bureau. The doctors there then examine the patient and discuss the case. Did the illness really exist? Is there a cure? If so, can it be explained naturally? Neurotic cases are ruled out completely. No case is accepted unless there has been some organic change—the healing of malignant tissue, the restoration of wasted nerves and muscles, or the sudden knitting of chronic bone fractures.

If the case appears inconclusive, it is immediately dropped. If it is retained, the patient is kept under observation by a local physician for at least a year, and complete documentation, including x-rays, laboratory reports, statements from attending physicians and other witnesses, is collected. Then, the patient is brought back to Lourdes for another examination by doctors of the most varied backgrounds.

“The medical work at Lourdes is run entirely by doctors, never forget that,” Doctor Leuret, until his recent death the president of the Medical Bureau, told me. Doctor Leuret was a remarkable person: Legion of Honour, Croix de Guerre, professor of medicine and head of a large clinic in the worst section of Bordeaux.

“During my time here,” Doctor Leuret continued, “Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, protestants of all sects, have been among our colleagues; atheists and unbelievers, too. It’s this study of the cures by men of such different viewpoints that guarantees our good faith.”

After the medical commission at Lourdes decides that a cure is outside the laws of nature, it is sent on to the medical commission at Paris. This commission, composed of 20 distinguished physicians and surgeons, then declares (or decides not to declare), “We find no natural or scientific explanation of this cure.” Only when this body has passed a case does it finally go to a Canonical Commission of the Church for final evaluation as a miracle.

How many have occurred at Lourdes? In nearly a century of the shrine’s existence 51 cases have been pronounced miraculous cures by the Church. This however, represents the most stringent selection. The Church does not deny the possibility of miracles “less complete,” of which there have been many; but it refuses to authenticate them. Among other stipulations, a Canonical Commission’s requirements for a miraculous cure are that the:

- Malady was grave and not improving under medication.
- Cure was instantaneous, with no period of convalescence.
- Cure was perfect and there was no relapse.

Many Unrecognized Cures

A large number of actual cures go without official recognition because of insufficient data. Sometimes home physicians have not kept sufficiently precise data. Other doctors refuse point-blank to furnish x-rays, diagnoses, or laboratory reports. “If it’s Lourdes, we’re not interested,” they say. Scores of people who are cured do not report it simply because they dislike publicity. Indeed, many people who now enjoy the blessings of being well after years of agony care not at all that their cures are not recognized as miracles. They return to Lourdes and give thanks every year just the same.

The Medical Bureau at Lourdes has complete records of 1,200 cures that it recognizes as being “inexplicable under natural laws,” but which the Church, for one reason or another, has refused to authenticate as miracles. In addition, the Medical Bureau has notations and material concerning some 4,000 other cases that are very probably complete and genuine cures. This may seem a small number, in view of the many thousands who come. However, ten such cures—or even one—would be equally dumbfounding.

Charles McDonald

One of the visiting doctors is often asked to officiate when a previously cured patient returns to Lourdes for examination. An American, Doctor Smiley Blanton, directed the examination of one of the most famous cures—Charles McDonald. Thirty-two doctors at the Bureau studied this remarkable case and Doctor Blanton later read an account of it before a joint session of the American Psychoanalytic and Psychiatric Associations.

Charles McDonald was brought to Lourdes from Dublin on September 6, 1936, with the Catholic Young Men's Pilgrimage of Ireland. He was then 31 and had been ill since he was 20. His Dublin physician certified that he had tuberculosis of the spine, nephritis, and tuberculous arthritis of the left shoulder. For 15 months, he had been completely bedfast and had five, large, draining abscesses. He had endured maddening pain, had been unable to sit up for more than four minutes at a time, and had been pronounced beyond medical aid.

No change in McDonald's condition occurred during his first day at Lourdes. The next day he was bathed again and later carried to a service at the Grotto. It was then that he began to feel the first glow of health.

"It should be remembered," says Doctor Blanton, "that, for 15 months, the patient had been unable to move his hips or shoulders without severe pain. Now, lying on a stretcher at the Grotto, he experimented by moving his arm slightly. There was no pain. He loosened the brace strap on his shoulder and raised his shoulders from the pillow—still without pain."

The next morning, when the doctors and nurses who had forbidden him to get up were out of the room, he got out of bed and dressed himself without help. That day he was taken to the Grotto in an invalid chair. Afterwards, though he had not made the slightest move without agonizing pain for over a year, he walked up the steps into the Rosary Church and was able to genuflect and kneel at one of the benches.

When he returned to Dublin, McDonald had the supreme pleasure of dispensing with the ambulance that had been so vitally necessary one short week before. The pilgrimage physician, Doctor Christopher Hannigan, wrote on August 29, 1937, "I have seen Mr.

McDonald twice since his return from Lourdes. I can declare definitely that there are no traces of his former illness. I am glad to testify to this cure, as when I first saw him I regarded his case as hopeless."

McDonald returned to Lourdes on September 16, 1937. Doctor Blanton and 32 other doctors examined him, found him in excellent health (as he is to this day), and agreed that, "No medical explanation, in the present state of science, can be given for his cure."

In his report to his American confreres, Doctor Blanton concludes, “We must lay aside as untenable the accusation that cases such as Charles McDonald’s are in any way ‘fixed’ or the histories ‘doctored.’ There does appear to be at this shrine a sudden quickening of the healing processes. The percentages of such cures are certainly too great to be laid to coincidence, nor do the details of the cures conform to the laws of recovery as we know them.”

“Even coincidental cures in our hospitals do not in the space of two or three days get up and walk without pain after 15 months in bed with continual pain. I believe something does occur which is ‘on the margin of the laws of nature.’ ”

Many observers think the extraordinary emotional climate of Lourdes is responsible for many of the cures achieved there because the whole atmosphere of the shrine intensifies faith.

Lack of Infections

One amazing aspect of Lourdes is the fact that the city has never had an epidemic. Two million travelers and 30,000 sick pass through Lourdes every year. Hundreds are given baths each day and many persons suffering from all manner of diseases are immersed in the same water. Yet, apparently, no infection ever results.

The Lourdes water is a strange phenomenon. In the early days, some canny Lourdes citizens had visions of exploiting the spring and turning the town into a flourishing thermal resort like Aix-les-Bains or Vichy.

They were bitterly disappointed when analysis revealed that the water contained no curative or medicinal properties whatever. It was found to be “similar in composition to most water found in mountainous areas where the soil is rich in calcium.”

However, a bacterial study of the bath waters did bring a remarkable discovery. The Medical Bureau, curious to learn why no infection resulted when one diseased patient after another was bathed in the same water, took samples from the baths and had them analyzed. The reports showed extreme pollution—streptococcus, staphylococcus, colibacillus, and all sorts of other germs. Yet, astonishingly, when guinea pigs were inoculated with this polluted water they remained perfectly healthy. At the same time, two out of three guinea pigs died when inoculated with water from the river Seine containing much the same bacilli.

Hence, the shrine’s devotees have an extraordinary regard for Lourdes’ water, as is attested by the following dramatic footnote: At the end of the day, the stretcher-bearers and nurses often dip a glass of water from the baths and drink it as an act of faith.

Serving Others

The service of these voluntary workers is lavish and untiring. Many of them are themselves cures from previous years, and their mere presence—the fact that they are now obviously strong and well—gives tremendous inspiration and hope to the sick.

The brancardiers, as the stretcher bearers are called, come from all walks of life—generals, mechanics, judges, clerks, bankers, civil servants. Over 2,000 of them are in the permanent association, each pledged to give a certain amount of time each year. They are on duty from dawn until midnight and sometimes later. Their tasks are heavy, their meals uncertain, their rest slight and often broken by emergency calls, for during the busy season they must care for the sick from as many as 22 pilgrim trains a day.

Every brancardier is given a small handbook of rules, the last of which is, “He must pray without ceasing.” The brancardiers ask nothing for themselves but the privilege of serving. “In 30 years’ service,” the president of their order told me proudly, “I have never once been refused by a brother brancardier, or even heard a murmur from him, when I asked him to perform one more difficult job at the end of the day.”

The volunteer nurses, of whom there are likewise about 2,000 enlisted from all social classes, also work indefatigably. They run up and down long flights of stairs, carry bedpans, change fetid dressings, and bathe malodorous wounds. They do it cheerfully, joyfully, and with constant prayer.

Indeed, the devotion and the spirit of dedication and self-giving that permeates the entire place is a powerful element in the Lourdes atmosphere. Hundreds of people look forward to giving up their vacation time to this work, year after year. The girl in the souvenir shop at my hotel comes from England every year and works in the shop mornings so that she can help at the baths in the afternoon. The girl at the Cook’s Travel Agency, who works all day, goes every evening to help at the Grotto until midnight.

Every one of these people find the utmost happiness in such service. As one stretcher bearer said, “These few days at Lourdes each August fix me up for the whole year. I live for 12 months on what I get here in just this one week!”

Daily Atmosphere

Early each morning you meet them swinging along the Esplanade on their way to the Mass—the leather-harnessed brancardiers carrying the stretcher cases and pushing the tragic little carriages. Among the “grands malades”—the very sick—are sights to wring the heart: a girl with beautiful classic features peering out from a plaster cast imprisoning her from head to foot; a priest, white and shrunken, in the last stages of tuberculosis; a

woman in a black veil, trying to conceal a face covered with flaming red sores; an old man hobbling along on twisted stumps. Yet, as they pass, you see their lips moving in prayer, you hear the nurses and brancardiers softly humming Ave Maria.

Once the patients are back from Mass, the trek to the baths begins. Volunteer nurses bathe the patients one by one, rubbing the water on those who are too ill to be immersed, but carefully removing all bandages so the water makes direct contact. All morning, and from two until four in the afternoon, the lines of stretchers and little carriages go to and from the pool. Behind the sick stands a tightly packed mass of friends and relatives, all praying earnestly. The prayer and faith perpetually rising as with one voice constitute an almost living force whose rhythms get into the blood. One would have to be made of stone not to be moved by it.

At four o'clock, the bells peal and the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament forms at the Grotto. The loud speakers open up and a great hymn rolls out, the huge crowd joining in unison. The procession then makes its long and impressive way along the Esplanade, each pilgrimage under its own banner. In the square, the sick are lined up in two long rows, and as the Blessed Sacrament approaches, the ardor of their prayer mounts. Then the officiating bishop, robed in white and gold, leaves the shelter of his golden canopy carrying the monstrance. The sick raise their pleading faces for the blessing, the great crowd falls to its knees, and the Host is raised above each one. This is the moment when a sick individual sometimes rises and, pale but triumphant, follows the Procession with a calm, victorious tread up the steps and into the Church.

Every evening at eight o'clock, when the torchlight procession begins, the Domaine becomes a blazing field of light. Everyone carries a paper-shaded candle to the Grotto, where the various pilgrimages gather under their illuminated signs. The tiny candle flames form larger and larger blocks of light until they become a huge wheel of fire about the Grotto. Then the procession starts out through the enveloping darkness like a moving serpent of fire. As it winds down the path, there is a great burst of singing under the stars. It is the "Song of Bernadette"—Ave, Ave Maria. The procession continues around the great horseshoe shaped ramp, down the side of one esplanade and up the other. The doors of the Hospital of Our Lady of Lourdes, on the esplanade, are opened, and, from the rows of beds, the sick join in the song, each in his own tongue.

For two hours, the marching and singing continue, and then the marchers mass in the square before the Rosary Church. At a signal from the bishop, all singing stops. Then, declaring their belief in God in Latin, the universal language of the Roman Catholic Church, all burst into the majestic chanting of the Credo. It is an experience no participant will ever forget.

Thus, even on a normal day, Lourdes is a tremendously exhilarating and inspiring place.

Electrifying Atmosphere

When a possible miracle occurs, Lourdes becomes positively electrifying. I saw it happen.

One afternoon I sat on the terrace of the Cafe Royale, directly across from the entrance to the Domaine. Everybody “falls in” there at the end of a hard day. The brancardiers unharness. The directors of the pilgrimages lean back in their chairs and relax over coffee and little cakes. Some of the old priests enjoy a joke and a cigar with the younger men and perhaps a thimble of cognac in their coffee.

The Hospital of the Sept Douleurs is just a few steps away and stretcher-bearers and invalid carriages pass by constantly. Buses swing by too, bearing crowds of singing pilgrims—the Basques and Italians waving a last good-bye to the Dutch and English in the cafe, with whom they have shared their five pilgrimage days. Traffic is terrific, as the different groups and organizations pour out of the Domaine after the Procession.

Suddenly, through all the hubbub and commotion, there is a swirl of figures over at the gateway and the mighty roll of the Magnificat. All spring to their feet, rush to the pavement, and cross themselves excitedly. Something is happening. A cure perhaps—a miracle? Then you see them.

Following the long line of stretchers and carriages returning to the hospital, comes a jubilant little procession: a group of brancardiers forming a guard of honor for a radiant young girl who walks as if on air. She is one of the Dutch pilgrims. She had been carried down to the Grotto that afternoon on a stretcher, after four years in bed with a tubercular spine. She is returning on her own two feet, singing and praising God.

Everybody joins in the singing. The Dutch and Spanish women hug each other. The little boys throw their caps in the air and cheer. The waiters smile and bring a double order for everyone.

Was it a miracle, really? Time will tell. But that girl’s eyes—!

I recognized one of the “unbelieving” French doctors, standing at the curb quite near me. I asked casually, “Well, what did you think of it?”

“It was—” He suddenly turned and fled into a shop, handkerchief held up to his face. I did not realize until afterwards that he was weeping. Never again did he have anything derisive to say about miracles.

Everybody talks about it at dinner. The Dutch are staying at our hotel and one of their nurses tells the wonderful story over and over. She is impatient because the pilgrimage doctor still hesitates to admit a miracle. He wants to wait and see. “But it’s true!” the nurse insists. “I saw it with my own eyes! Four of us had to carry the girl to the bath.

After we had plunged her in, stiff as a board, I saw her arms and legs bend. I saw her sit down on the edge of the bath and help us while we put her clothes back on again!”

“She left her cast and brace at the Grotto,” another verifies joyfully. “The other patients are enraptured. They had all been praying for this girl day and night—she was the worst of our cases.”

She is correct. There is neither envy nor disappointment among the ambulant patients who have been denied their own cures. All round the big dining room, faces are glowing, eyes shining, and triumphal smiles radiating delight at their comrade’s good fortune. It is something to cherish and remember, for the joy in these facts, the spirit in this room, transcend description.

Transformation

One might think the uncured would regard their pilgrimage as an unmitigated tragedy. Instead, they seem to find at Lourdes a new hope and a new strength with which to bear their burdens. Some patients, of course, do return home disappointed and rebellious, and still passionately longing for the cure that was denied them. Yet, they are rare.

Pilgrims come to Lourdes weary and worn with pain, hardly able to make the dreadful journey, resenting their sickness and wondering why God has thus afflicted them—a burden to themselves and to those who bring them. At Lourdes station, the humblest of them, the despairing and the lost, are warmly welcomed, gently transported, and tenderly looked after. In their quarters, they are surrounded with all that lavish care, love, and devotion can give. At the shrine, they find themselves among hundreds of other sick—many worse off than they are—and the transformation begins. They start to think about their neighbor in the next bed or in the next little carriage. They pray for him and soon begin to long, above everything else, for his cure.

In sum, they forget themselves. They soon become absorbed in love of God and love for fellow man, the two great solvents for all human ills, as Jesus taught.

Time after time, I was told at Lourdes—by doctors, nurses, brancardiers, even by the man who sweeps the paths, “The sick? Oh, Madame, they have forgotten about their own cure. All they care about is that the man in the next row shall get well. . . . ‘Don’t bother about me—that fellow over there needs you more.’ . . . ‘Never mind, nurse, I can wait.’ . . . ‘Look after this poor lady in the next carriage—she really needs attention’.”

Naturally, the pain comes back again, but it does not have the same hold. Their minds are not centered on it any longer. When the time comes to go home, though they have

not been physically cured, though they know what hardships and suffering another pilgrimage will mean, their one cry is, “If only I can come back next year! If only I can come again to Lourdes!”

Personal Studies

Guy Leydet

During my study of this shrine, which occupied over a year, I looked up several famous cures, or miracles, as they are called. Perhaps the most astonishing of them was Guy Leydet, whose restoration from hopeless mental disability first drew my attention to Lourdes.

Today Guy Leydet is a tall, nice-looking lad of 14. When I visited his home in Saint Etienne, where his father is a professor in a local business college, I found him happily running off with his friends to play football. His mother, a charming and very pretty woman, was proud of his standing in his classes, said he hoped soon to go to England as an exchange student.

Yet, less than ten years ago, doctors had pronounced the dread word, “Incurable.”

Guy Leydet was a normal child until the age of five. Then he was stricken with acute meningo-encephalitis—a brain disease that can wreck the nervous system. It paralyzed both arms and legs, caused frequent convulsions and epileptic seizures, and, worst of all, finally brought about complete mental immobilization. The child could utter only guttural sounds and no longer recognized his parents. This condition lasted for two years and his parents all but ruined themselves financially in fruitless efforts to find a cure.

Finally, they went to Lourdes. At the piscine, compassionate nurses dipped the rigid little boy into the water. His mother, fearing another convulsion, stood near anxiously, and they handed him back to her.

Then suddenly it happened.

Guy Leydet opened his eyes, reached his arms toward his mother, and in a clear, childish voice cried, “Mama!” He then began to count his fingers, naming them over, as French children do. Moreover, he moved his arms and legs perfectly.

Back home, the Leydets called in their doctor, who gazed in bewilderment at his former patient. He admitted that he could not understand it at all. “Well—try to reeducate the boy,” he said, still incredulous.

It was easy. The child's mind rapidly reawakened and he soon learned to read and write as well as play vigorously like other children. On September 26, 1947—one year after his cure—he was examined by 40 doctors at the Medical Bureau. Doctor Robert Dailly, a child specialist from Paris, tested his mental development for two hours. Then he announced simply, “This child is normal.”

The case provoked long and heated discussion at the Medical Bureau, for the cure of such a condition—of postencephalitic lethargica—was unprecedented. One major question tantalized the doctors. As one of them bluntly put it, “With what brain does this child think? What brain was he using when he stood up and suddenly called to his mother? Was it a new brain that called her or was it the partially destroyed brain he had a moment before?”

Whatever the answer, it was contrary to all natural laws and the 40 doctors unanimously declared that the child had been supernaturally cured. The case was never proclaimed a miracle because the doctors who attended the boy before his visit to Lourdes have absolutely refused to submit any records or certificates.

“But what do we care about that?” said the mother. “We have our boy—happy and well. Our *Te Deums* are sung right here at home, every day!”

Fernand Legrand

Another famous cure I visited was Fernand Legrand. He had come to Lourdes as a grand malade more than 20 years ago. Yet, one of the brancardiers there still remembers him vividly. “The most terrible case I ever helped to carry,” he told me.

I went to see Fernand at his home in Gisors, a small town near Paris. He is a cobbler and lives in a narrow house behind his modest shop. We sat by the fire in the cheerful little sitting room, and I studied his fine face. He is a man of 50 with the face of an Emerson, the hands of a shoemaker. As customers dropped in at intervals to claim a pair of boots, Fernand Legrand told me his story.

When he was a husky young fellow of 26, he met with a hunting accident and the lower part of his left leg had to be amputated. He recovered from the operation, but a year later severe pains began in that leg followed by numbness that gradually spread all over his body. The trouble was diagnosed as polyneuritis, involving particularly the spinal nerves and the spinal cord itself.

All the classic treatments were tried, but Fernand only grew worse. His legs became gangrenous and greatly swollen, the rest of his body as thin as a skeleton. He suffered tortures, and finally his fiancée persuaded him to go to Lourdes.

It took six men to get him from the automobile into the pilgrimage train, for Fernand could make no movement of any kind. Each effort, each disturbance of the bedclothes even, gave him excruciating pain. The journey was a horror.

His own physician, Doctor Edouard Decrette of Vernon, accompanied him and described the case with such concern at Lourdes that the Medical Bureau appointed Doctor Marc Clement of Hyeres to examine him. Together, Doctor Clement and Doctor Decrette went to the hospital, where they found that Fernand had just returned from his first bath.

Doctor Clement took the right leg out of its cast and bandages. "Look here," he said to Doctor Decrette, "you told me he had a swollen leg. This one isn't swollen and it is dry."

"Impossible!" said Decrette. Then, as he looked, he gave a quick exclamation. "But—since when?"

"Since my bath," said the patient. "When they dipped me in the water I felt a moment of agonizing pain, as though my arms and legs were being broken to pieces. Then, a heavenly warmth spread through my body, my legs could bend, and I no longer had any pain."

Doctor Decrette, who had seen Fernand in such a horrible condition for so long, was so moved that it was several minutes before he could even speak.

Fernand's recovery was complete. He has since returned to Lourdes nearly every year as a brancardier. I asked, "Doesn't your artificial leg make it difficult for you?"

"Difficult!" he laughed. "Madame, you should see me. Since my cure, I can run like a rabbit, wooden leg and all. None of the brancardiers with real legs can get ahead of me!"

Jeanne Fretel

One evening, I had dinner with Jeanne Fretel, one of the most famous of recent Lourdes cures. When I met her at the doors of the Sept Douleurs Hospital, she had been on duty there since six o'clock that morning. Yet, as she came swinging along in her nurse's uniform, a slim girl with big dark eyes, she was fresh, smiling, and unfatigued. As she sat opposite me in the hotel restaurant a few minutes later, laughing and chatting over the meal, it was hard to imagine how desperate her plight had been five years ago. Yet, her case history, one of the most completely documented at Lourdes, contains 80 pages of detailed hospital reports, laboratory analysis, X-ray records, and so forth, to prove it.

Jeanne was born in 1914 in the town of Sougeal, near Rennes. She came from simple people and had to make her own way. She was a waitress, practical nurse, and mother's helper. From childhood on, her health was precarious. In January of 1938, when she was

24, she was operated on for appendicitis. This proved to be the first of 13 operations, for she developed tubercular peritonitis. Her abdomen gradually increased in size, became hard and intensely painful. Nothing helped, and her condition continued to grow worse.

She was put aboard the train of the Rosary Pilgrimage unconscious and arrived at Lourdes on Tuesday, October 5, 1948. No improvement occurred during the first three days there. On Friday morning, she was carried, dying, to the Mass for the Sick. The priest hesitated to give her Communion because of her constant vomiting and extreme weakness, but her brancardier insisted and she was given a bit of the consecrated wafer.

“It was then,” Jeanne said, “that suddenly I felt well and became aware, for the first time, that I was at Lourdes. They asked me how I felt. I said I felt very well. My abdomen was still hard and swollen, but I was not suffering at all.”

“After Mass they took me to the Grotto on my stretcher. After some minutes there, I had a sensation as if someone took me under the arms to help me sit up. I found myself in a sitting position. I looked around to see who had helped me, but could see no one. Then I had the feeling that the same hands that had helped me to sit up now took my hands and put them on my abdomen. I perceived that it had become normal. And then I was seized with an extraordinary hunger.”

The journey home was accomplished without fatigue, although she was on her feet in the train much of the time, tending the other patients. When her own physician, Doctor Alphonse Pelle, saw her, he was speechless, and left the room, overcome. When he came back a few minutes later, the tears were running down his cheeks. He then gave Jeanne a rigorous examination, but could hardly believe his findings.

An interesting sidelight is the fact that Doctor Pelle was an agnostic and unbeliever—“hostile” to religion, the Medical Bureau report says. However, his precise records and certificates established the case as a miraculous cure. “I have been a terrible blow to Doctor Pelle’s scientific self-respect,” Jeanne said.

Jeanne is in perfect health now and the long hours of her work as a practical nurse do not affect her at all. The life of a miraculee is not easy, however. Her correspondence is tremendous. Letters come from all over the world—from doctors, from sick people, from unbelievers wanting to be reassured. If she sends typewritten replies, people are not satisfied. They want the letters to be in her own hand and, after her day’s work, she frequently stays up far into the night writing them.

When she comes to Lourdes, everybody points her out. Her work in the hospital is interrupted time and again by visitors, by relatives of the sick who want to see her, to

touch her. Six persons came up and spoke to her while we were dining together at the hotel. “I can’t refuse them,” Jeanne said. “I can’t refuse anything, after what has been done for me.”

All the miracles I know about—and I have talked with many of them—have certain characteristics in common.

First, they are simple people—the poor and the humble. Not one came from a wealthy or impressive family. “The Blessed Virgin does not interest herself much in the rich,” they say at Lourdes.

Second, they seem to be immune to illness after their cure. They do not get sick at all, even with common colds or digestive troubles. They are in excellent health at all times.

Finally, they have a poise, an inner dignity, that comes from the desire to be worthy of the great thing they have experienced. They are completely unassuming, and have no wish to exploit the publicity that surrounds them. They just want to give, in gratitude for what has been done for them.

Whatever one may consider is the real source of their cure, there is not the slightest doubt that a transcendental influence has laid its hand upon these people and blessed them—not merely with a physical cure but with enduring serenity, peace, and deep joy. I count it a privilege to have known them.

Now come the crucial questions: What is the origin or cause of all these cures? How do you explain them? If they are not miracles—that is, produced by some supernatural power—what are they?

The answer of the skeptics, both lay and medical, is a flat, “I don’t believe it! It is too fantastic.”

When I was a young reporter in Asia, people in remote Indian and Chinese villages did not believe in the New York skyline. Nothing I could say would change their conviction that it was “only a picture.” They had never seen such a place. It was something outside their experience. Therefore it could not be.

“Before you enter into a discussion about Lourdes with anybody,” says Doctor Blanton, “it will save time and much useless argument if you find out first if the person you are talking to was ever there.” After the rationalist physician has actually seen a cure, his scientific cocksureness is severely shaken. He no longer avoids the word “miracle.” Instead, he uses it freely—almost involuntarily.

He does not, however, necessarily concede that the miracles have a supernatural origin. One of the favorite explanations of Lourdes cures by rationalist doctors is that they are produced by “unknown natural forces” whose laws may be uncovered tomorrow.

Most of the doctors at the Medical Bureau discount this theory. They point out that the action of the forces of nature is always uniform and unchanging. The law of gravity, for example, works in exactly the same way for everybody. If “unknown natural forces” were responsible for Lourdes cures, they would have to act the same for all persons under similar conditions. Yet, the exact opposite is true. The “unknown forces” act neither constantly nor uniformly. They act today, but not tomorrow; for some people, but not for others. One of the baffling things about Lourdes cures is their extreme variability and unpredictability.

What, then, is the cause of the miracles? Many ascribe it to prayer.

When Charles Steinmetz, the great scientist of General Electric, was asked by his colleagues what was the most important line of research for them to follow next, he answered without hesitation, “Prayer. Find out about prayer!” Alexis Carrel has stated his conviction that “the power of prayer is the greatest power in the world.”

Writing about the miracles, Carrel noted, “Patients have been cured almost instantaneously of various afflictions such as peritoneal or bone tuberculosis, abscesses, osteitis, suppurating wounds, cancer, and so forth. In a few seconds, or at the most a few hours, wounds are cicatrized, pathological symptoms disappear, appetite returns. The miracle is characterized by an extreme acceleration of the processes of organic repair. No scientific hypothesis up to the present accounts for the phenomena, but the only condition indispensable for its occurrence is prayer. The patient does not need himself to pray or to have any religious faith; but someone around him must be in a state of prayer.

Doctor Vallet, former president of the Medical Bureau, does not believe that prayer in itself is capable of releasing the process of healing. Summing it up, he says that prayer is necessary, “but it is also necessary that God agree to it. These cures are not the result of accident but of an all-powerful Will that hears this prayer and Whom nothing resists, neither sickness—nor death.”

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The Town of Lourdes

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